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FROM THE AMBASSADOR FOR SPEAKER PELOSI

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [SENV](#) [BE](#)
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR SPEAKER PELOSI'S MAY 30 MEETING
WITH BELGIAN PM VERHOFSTADT

1. (U) Summary: Your meeting with Belgian PM Guy Verhofstadt is more than a courtesy call with a close friend of the United States. Prime Minister Verhofstadt, who will be entering the home stretch of a tough reelection battle, wants to learn more about your thinking on environmental issues and to provide you with a working politician's view of how green politics are playing in Europe. Your meeting also offers an opportunity to talk about key transatlantic security issues including relations with Russia and Afghanistan, where we are pressing Belgium to send additional troops and to lift tight restrictions limiting their exposure to combat operations. If time permits, you can expect the Prime Minister to raise African affairs with you -- Belgium wants us to do more in Central Africa including, of course, the Democratic Republic of Congo. End summary.

U.S. Ties with Belgium -- Good and getting Better

2. (U) Prime Minister Verhofstadt has played an instrumental role in turning U.S.-Belgian relations around since the low point of spring 2003. In addition to making good on a pledge to end the law on "Universal Competence" (which opened the door to politicized legal action against U.S. officials), his administration provided critical logistical support to the U.S. after Hurricane Katrina hit. In terms of foreign policy, he has been a vocal critic of Iranian nuclear ambitions, a strong supporter of the China arms embargo, and a steady promoter of democratic aspirations in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. He was one of the first and remains today one of the loudest supporters of Turkey's dream of entering the EU.

3. (U) Despite the opposition of his Socialist coalition partners, Verhofstadt has maintained Belgium's modest military presence in Afghanistan, where Belgian troops presently oversee security at Kabul airport and take part in a German-led provincial reconstruction team. The U.S. administration also has been pleased with his willingness to grant limited and largely civilian assistance to Iraq while muting public criticism of the U.S. We also have been gratified by Belgium's active role in the current UN peacekeeping operation in Lebanon.

A Tough Election Fight

4. (U) Your visit occurs at a worrying time for the Prime Minister. With national elections set for June 10, he has strong reason to fear losing his job in an election that largely concerns parochial local issues. His Flemish Liberal

party is lagging in the polls and could, according to projections, lose around one-third of his seats. The same polls project a victory for a coalition including the Christian Democrats, Belgium's traditional governing party. The Christian Democrats have been out of power since Verhofstadt's party defeated them in 1999. Local observers are not counting Verhofstadt out, however; he is a skilled campaigner who could easily ignite a sudden wave of support in the 52 percent of the electorate who have yet to make up their minds.

Verhofstadt's Green Politics

15. (SBU) The Prime Minister hopes his renewed commitment to environmentalism will help him seal the deal with the voters. Having included Belgium's two green parties in his first coalition government in 1999 but dumped them in 2003, Verhofstadt has some fences to mend but is seen as sympathetic to environmental concerns. He has polished his environmentalist credentials by meeting with Al Gore (in Brussels this spring his film) and by proposing measures to combat climate change. Although Belgium is committed to reducing its CO2 emissions by 7.5 percent below 1990 levels under the Kyoto Protocol, 2005 data project it falling far short of that goal. Verhofstadt is proposing additional measures (and emission credit purchases) to put Belgium nearer its goal. By attracting green voters, the Prime Minister will also keep them from backing the socialist party) his chief rival though partner in the present coalition government. Under Belgium's federal structure the regions are responsible for environmental policy, so Verhofstadt's role is limited to tax measures and energy regulations.

16. (SBU) Aside from climate change, the other key environmental issue in this election is whether Belgium will retain its policy to start decommissioning its nuclear power plants in 2015. This commitment, made when the green parties were in the 1999-2003 coalition government, does not square with the reality that 56 percent of Belgium's electricity comes from nuclear generation. No alternatives have been agreed upon, and replacing it with fossil-fuel power plants would massively increase the country's CO2 output. Liberal and Christian Democrat parties are willing to extend use of the existing facilities while "new generation" power plants are developed; other parties won't commit. This is a hot potato issue during the election period.

What We Want

16. (U) The primary U.S. goal in Belgium is maintaining the country's commitment to fighting terrorism. We are achieving excellent results in this area, in which we were helped by the news that two Belgians were killed in Iraq while attempting to launch a suicide bomb attack against American forces. Second, we are seeking increased cooperation in places like Afghanistan, where Belgian forces operate on a tight leash held by the Defense Minister here in Brussels. A greater willingness to take risks there will help the broader international effort. Third, on the environmental front, we want Belgium to spend more on innovation to help address global warming. If the EU has stressed controlling emissions and the U.S. has focused mostly on energy research over the past decade, we are coming to meet in the middle. Belgium is a good example of where new technologies will be essential to achieving both economic growth and environmental protection. Deeper EU commitment to clean energy technology could help find the innovations needed by our countries and the developing world. Fox

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